BOTSWANA'S BRIGADES

Since its inception in the late nineteen-sixties, Botswana’s Brigade Movement has attracted the service of over a dozen Friends, eight of whom have been working with Brigades at some time during the past three years. Brigade training is one approach with which a developing country is tackling the twin problems of education and employment. This article presents a brief account of the Brigade Movement, its background, philosophy and development, and, arising out of the experiences of one Brigade Centre, discusses problems encountered in practice and draws tentative conclusions which may be relevant to the operation of similar activities elsewhere.

An exciting feature of Botswana is that its problems do not seem insoluble. Though three times the size of the United Kingdom, Botswana has a smaller population than Glasgow. Less than one percent of its land area is given over to arable agriculture, but this is still sufficient to yield an acreage of arable land per head of population which is equivalent to that of Zimbabwe, and greater than that of both Kenya and Malawi. Botswana has a national cattle herd that is four times the size of its population, and it operates the largest export abattoir in Africa. It is a mineral rich country with three diamond mines, one of which is exploiting the second largest diamond pipe in the world, and mines extracting coal and copper-nickel. Botswana is regarded as having one of the most stable multi-party parliamentary democracies in Africa and, therefore, attracts greater overseas aid per head of population than almost anywhere else in the Third World.

The wealth of these resources, however, has yet to relieve significantly those living in deep poverty, particularly those living in the rural areas. Ownership of the cattle herd is highly skewed. Over half of the national herd is owned by 5% of all households, while 45% of rural households own no cattle at all. Exploitation of mineral wealth is achieved only at the cost of heavy investment in capital-intensive processes, the equipment for which is almost totally imported. The very low population density, even of the more heavily populated eastern region, increases significantly the cost per capita of providing health and education services, and water supplies. A drought, or an outbreak of foot and mouth disease, both of which have
occurred within the last three years, bring real hardship. Finally, Botswana’s geographical position in southern Africa has made it an important refuge to those from war-torn Rhodesia and Angola as well as those escaping from oppression in South Africa. This, and the need to defend its border with Rhodesia, has inevitably diverted resources which could have been devoted to rural development.

The Botswana Government has long accepted the need to assign rural development a high priority in the use of resources. Over nine-tenths of those Batswana living in deep poverty are living in rural areas. Resources are thus being channelled into improving water supplies, health services and primary education in these areas. However, there are at least two other major tasks of rural development that face the country. Firstly, the provision of secondary education. Botswana is close to achieving universal primary education and is committed to a policy which will make it compulsory and free. However, only 44% of primary school leavers have the opportunity to go onto secondary school, although over 90% are ambitious for some form of secondary education. This gap seems likely to become larger. As the result of assigning priority to primary education, it is estimated that the proportion of primary school leavers in 1985/86 who will have the opportunity to go onto secondary school, will be only 25%.

Secondly the Government faces the challenge of growing numbers of poor unemployed and underemployed. In 1977 it commissioned a policy-oriented study of both existing and potential employment opportunities in Botswana. In the Report of this study, Professor Michael Lipton of the University of Sussex has estimated that Botswana needs to generate an additional 35,000 working opportunities per annum, in each of the next ten years, in order to meet the goal of full employment by 1988. This target includes the provision of alternative employment for more than 60,000 Batswana who are employed as migrant workers in South Africa. Professor Lipton regards this as a reasonable target. Nevertheless, it seems staggering. If the UK could achieve an equivalent rate of employment creation for its larger population, it would solve its unemployment problem in six months. As Professor Lipton says, however, to aim for much less is to incur serious risks. The combination of rising literacy, urbanisation, persistent mass unemployment and islands of affluence is politically unstable.
A significant initiative in the field of secondary education and youth employment arose from the experience of Patrick van Rensburg, then Principal of the secondary school he started in Serowe. Fifteen years ago he came to see that a conventional, western-styled, development of Botswana would promote benefits for the few, that economic development would bypass the rural areas, and that the young would continue to leave the rural areas for the mines of South Africa, or to the growing towns of Botswana in the largely forlorn hope of employment. In particular he became increasingly of the opinion that conventional western-styled secondary education was irrelevant to the needs of a developing country, and was likely to reinforce the lopsided nature of the country's development.

Drawing upon his own experience and that of others in the developing world, he started the first of Botswana's Brigades in Serowe to provide an education and training relevant to those living in rural Botswana. As originally conceived, Brigades are groups of primary school leavers who are engaged upon a course of education and vocational training which combines basic academic studies (English, mathematics, science and development studies), trade theory instruction and on-the-job training with production in such a way that the value added in the production process is sufficient to cover all recurrent costs, including those of theory instruction and academic teaching. Initial capital costs were to be met, where possible, by grants, and expatriate volunteers were to provide the skilled manpower needed in the establishment of the Centre.

The principle of cost-recovery was an important element in this model, for it would enable the approach to be replicable on a wider scale in developing countries where there are inadequate resources to finance universal full-time post-primary education and training. However, this link between education and production was not seen merely as a way of financing education. The trainees’ experience of production was intended to direct more purposefully his academic studies and, conversely, his academic studies should be designed with a view to supplying him with the intellectual skills he needs for the development of his own trade skill, and also those other skills and knowledge relevant and necessary for the development of his own community.
The experiments started in Serowe in the mid nineteen-sixties have since inspired the development of a national Brigade Movement. Similar clusters of Brigades were formed in the other major villages. In 1969 the National Brigades Co-ordinating Committee was established, as the result of a Presidential Directive, to advise Government upon the development of the Brigade Movement. There are now sixteen Brigade Centres, each of which is governed by a Board of Trustees drawn from the local community. The Ministry of Education has established a department, BRIDEC (BRIGades DEvelopment Centre), to support the Brigade Movement and to encourage its growth. Government financial support comes in the form of modest per capita recurrent subsidies and of substantial, World Bank financed, capital grants for buildings and equipment. Apart from administering the flow of subsidies and grants to Brigade Centres, BRIDEC's major responsibilities are Brigade staff training, particularly that of Instructors, and the recruitment of expatriate volunteers.

The scope and size of Brigade Centres varies widely. The smallest Centre employs only one member of staff who is training ten girls in dressmaking. Almost all Brigade Centres have Builders Brigades; many have Carpentry Brigades and Farming, Electrical and Mechanical Brigades are also well represented. As well as being the oldest Centre, the Serowe Brigades Development Trust is also the largest, accounting for over a third of the 2,500 trainees, employees and staff who are occupied full-time in the Brigade Movement. The SBDT now has eighteen Brigades which provide training and employment in 27 different skills as diverse as weaving, forestry, panel-beating and photo-lithography to over 500 trainees and nearly 230 employees. A special feature of the SBDT is its Bridging Course, a post-primary but pre-Brigade course for younger primary school leavers. The two distinctive characteristics of the course are that the academic content is greater (half of each week is devoted to academic study compared with the usual day per week), and that trainees are given a grounding in four different skills, on a three-month cycle, in preparation for the Brigades proper. However, the SBDT's activities are not confined to Brigades. It runs a vehicle hire service and a bus service, both organised as consumer co-operatives, and a creche for the children of staff and employees, particularly women working in a small group of rural crafts producer co-operatives. The SBDT is, therefore, a relatively large and complex organisation involved in nearly 40 different commercial and educational activities directed primarily towards the education and training of primary school leavers.
It is, in fact, remarkable to see the achievements in Serowe, and at other Centres, when one considers the problems that have to be overcome. There are, of course, the straightforward problems of obtaining materials and equipment, mainly from South Africa and sometimes to Centres which are separated from the nearest railhead by several hundred kilometres of dirt road. However, I want to devote the rest of this article to a discussion of the less obvious, but more difficult problems, that have to be met and overcome by Brigade Centres.

The first major problem is concerned with the fundamental characteristic of Brigades — the attempt to link production, training and education — and the problem arises out of conflicts between different interest groups in their understanding of the Brigades' role. The problem first assumed major proportions in Serowe when Serowe Engineering trainees complained to the Trust that their training was being neglected and, in particular, that they were receiving little theory instruction. Brigade Managers, then mainly expatriate volunteers, responded by claiming that the necessary theory was being taught in the course of on-the-job training, and then went on to criticise what they saw as the increasing emphasis upon academic studies which cut deep into production time and made it impossible, in their view, to cover costs. More importantly, they contended that trainees were being encouraged in an attitude which placed greater importance upon academic achievement than upon the acquisition of productive Skills. There were also latent causes of the resentment felt by these managers, mainly concerned with questions of control and authority, but the manifest ones nevertheless deserved attention.

This internal conflict was further complicated by two separate views held in the Ministry of Education, both propounded by different groups of expatriates. Those in BRIDEC viewed Brigades as low-cost vocational training institutions whose job it was to train young people to set standards in skills for which paid employment was proved to exist. Thus it was easier for Brigade Centres to gain support for training in mechanics, carpentry and building than in textiles and agriculture. Furthermore, since applicants for the employment opportunities that did exist would need to demonstrate an ability in the use of relatively sophisticated equipment, Brigades found themselves training some skills which were not relevant to rural production.
The second Ministry view, associated with a recently arrived senior officer, is that vocational training in Botswana should only be provided to those who have previously proved their basic academic aptitude in public examinations, so that successful examinees may follow well-established courses that lead to internationally recognised qualifications. These courses would be run at a national Centre until universal secondary education had been achieved, when vocational training would revert to Brigades. In the meantime, Brigades should concentrate upon developing the academic ability of primary school leavers in English, mathematics and science. No reference is made to development studies.

Thus a number of important features of Brigades have become badly neglected. Modern-sector skills have taken precedence over those more relevant to rural communities, reinforcing the drift of young people to urban areas. Products and services directed towards export, expatriate and government markets are more plentifully provided than those relevant to local needs and within the purchasing power of local people. Cost recovery has become a more difficult condition to meet and the essential links between production, education and training have become weaker.

The next major problem encountered has been the difficulty of managing these novel, and sometimes complex, organisations in a commercially successful way, without neglecting their educational and community developmental objectives. In the initial stages, Brigades are often managed by expatriate volunteers who are chosen for their technical skills, but who have seldom had experience of managing commercial activities. However, many volunteers will justify their role in a developing country on the grounds that they are transferring administrative skills as well as technical ones. Thus it is important for them to feel that their work has promoted localisation (i.e. the process by which a local national accedes to a role previously performed by an expatriate) and, since the majority of volunteers have committed themselves to their post for two or three years, there has been a tendency to assume that a Brigade can be started and developed to a viable state and that the volunteer can localise his managerial function, all within three years — a task that would be unthinkable in the countries from which the volunteers come. This process is further complicated by the possibility that English, an official language
in Botswana, is a second language to both the volunteer and his counterpart, and by other cultural differences (a trivial example — a Motswana student of accountancy will find that the terminology and conventions taught by American accountants is different to that taught by British accountants). It is not surprising then that Brigades find it difficult to survive their subsidised infancy, and that there have been cases of de-localisation to prevent the collapse of older Brigades.

The financial viability of the Serowe Brigades was, however, further impaired by the vexed problem of pay differentials. It has proved almost impossible for Brigade Centres to ignore the comparatively high rates of pay in the towns and in government service when considering its own staff salary levels. However, Brigades' productivity has not kept pace with the consequent pay increases. The problem of pay differentials between different Brigades within the Trust has been almost as acute as that between the Trust and the outside world, particularly between engineering Brigades, who can justify their claims by comparison with high rates for similar skills in the towns, and agricultural and textile Brigades, who cannot. In some ways, the problem of unrealistic pay claims has been encouraged by the helpful and generous attitude of foreign donors which has, innocently, tended to undermine efforts to inculcate financial discipline. Serowe Brigade managers came to feel that however dire were the warnings uttered by the Trust Secretary and Accountant, money would be forthcoming to underwrite their operations — and, up to mid 1979, they had yet to be proved wrong.

What conclusions can be drawn then from Botswana's experience of Brigades? Firstly, a Brigades success depends upon its ability to compete successfully in a commercial market, although its objectives are not mainly commercial. Thus its growth and development are likely to be undermined by national economic policies which take insufficient account of the necessary conditions for rural development, i.e. of the need of smallholders to generate income from agriculture, probably by use of producer subsidies, and to control the differential between urban and rural per capita incomes. Brigades, as conceived originally, are not sufficiently sturdy institutions to withstand adverse general economic conditions. The Government and District Councils have supported Brigades with large building and furniture contracts, but some measure of protection from foreign competitors is required by small and promising local producers.
Secondly, the problems of managing Brigades are more difficult than may at first be imagined, partly because they are novel organizations with multiple objectives. Thus it is important for there to be consensus, between all involved, on what are the objectives of their Brigades, and on the process by which these objectives are to be achieved. Much more time needs to be spent in imbuing new and existing staff and trainees with the philosophy and development of the Brigades Movement. Furthermore, close attention should be given to the examples of management demonstrated by the more enlightened and successful commercial enterprises — lines of responsibility and areas of authority need to be clearly defined and accepted; the exercise of authority must be properly accounted for to the relevant interest groups, but in such a way that it is not undermined.

Thirdly, it is very important to examine carefully the role of overseas assistance in the development of Brigades. It is clear that some of the Brigade Movement's problems are the result of insufficient sensitivity on the part of expatriates to the nature of local needs and aspirations. Much greater effort needs to be made in order that expatriate volunteers have a better understanding of how their role is perceived by local people and, more particularly, of the problems of discontinuity caused by a succession of volunteers from different cultures on short contracts. IVS and CUSO (Canadian University Service Overseas) have now adopted a policy by which they will commit themselves to an approved project not just for the contract term of one volunteer, but for the full length of time it is thought reasonable to adequately train a counterpart, supplying, if necessary, a succession of volunteers and ensuring that each is properly briefed so that the training process is not disrupted. However, overseas assistance in the form of grants needs also to be carefully controlled if Brigades are not to develop a dependency which they will find hard to cast off. In the areas of both personal and financial assistance, there are delicate balances to be struck.

Finally, it is important to record that Brigades have been successful in providing low-cost training. Many trainees have reached a recognised level of proficiency in their chosen skills at a cost to the state of just over £100 per trainee per annum, and most of these have subsequently been successful in finding employment. Furthermore, quite a number of
Brigades have gained themselves good reputations for the quality of product or service they provide. Many are also satisfying some of the local needs for products and services that otherwise would be satisfied by imports, or not at all. At their best, Brigades have successfully fulfilled the role expected of them.

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